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U.S. Predicting Fight Will Last Well Into Spring

Military: Joint Chiefs chairman says forces are prepared for winter combat. Planes strike Taliban troops north of Afghan capital. Pentagon identifies two soldiers killed in crash.

By PETER PAE, TIMES STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON -- Top Bush administration officials warned Sunday that the military campaign in Afghanistan could continue well into the spring and beyond, raising the prospect of winter fighting for American troops.

"This is going to be a very, very long campaign," said Air Force Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in an interview on ABC's "This Week." "It may take till next spring. It may take till next summer. It may take longer than that in Afghanistan."

As the airstrikes continued into a third week and included attacks on the Taliban regime's troops, Myers also warned that while U.S. forces would take terrorism suspect Osama bin Laden alive if possible, "bullets will fly" if necessary. "It depends on the circumstances," Myers said. "If it's a defensive situation, then you know, bullets will fly. But if we can capture somebody, then we'll do that."

In northern Afghanistan, U.S. warplanes launched their closest strikes yet to Taliban troops near the front line north of Kabul, the Afghan capital.

Navy F/A-18 Hornet fighters struck Taliban forces dug in close to the strategic Bagram air base for about an hour and were heard circling over the area again less than four hours later.

The opposition Northern Alliance has repeatedly said it plans to surround Taliban troops along the Bagram front by launching a ground offensive.

In an interview with CNN, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell said the Bush administration was in discussions with the Northern Alliance about the fate of Kabul and another Taliban-held city, Mazar-i-Sharif, near the border with

Uzbekistan.

"We're very interested in seeing them take the town in the north, Mazar-i-Sharif, and I'm quite confident that they want to at least invest Kabul," he said. "Whether they actually go into Kabul or not, or whether that's the best thing to do or not, remains to be seen."

The loss of Mazar-i-Sharif, where fighting has been intense, could seriously disrupt the Taliban's links to other northern areas and open up a new route to Kabul.

The Northern Alliance forces near Kabul have been eagerly awaiting U.S. airstrikes so they can advance. They are reportedly 35 miles from the capital, and perhaps closer.

But U.S. warplanes had so far held off, apparently in deference to Pakistan, a key U.S. ally that opposes an advance on Kabul by the mainly ethnic Uzbek and Tajik opposition at the expense of the Pushtun, the largest ethnic group. A majority of the Taliban's members and a sizable portion of Pakistan's population are Pushtun.

Powell said it "would be in our interest and the interest of the coalition to see this matter resolved before winter strikes and it makes our operations that much more difficult."

Indeed, U.S. officials are not only facing the military challenge of continuing the conflict during winter, when snow and cloud cover could pose problems for ground troops, but also the delicate diplomatic issue of the upcoming Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Indonesia warned U.S. officials Sunday that there would be "explosive" consequences in the Islamic world if the military strikes stretched into the holy month, which starts Nov. 17. Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population.

But Powell said that while he was mindful of the religious significance of Ramadan, "we also have to make sure that we pursue our campaign."

"We'll have to see where the mission is at that point and what needs to be done and would yield to my colleagues in the Pentagon as to what we will do as we approach the season of Ramadan," he said.

However, neither Ramadan nor winter will deter the Northern Alliance from making its long-awaited move on Kabul, said Gen. Abdul Basir, a top commander with the opposition forces.

"We are going to get rid of the Taliban and we are ready to do it, whether it is Ramadan or some other time," he said. "The Taliban is dangerous for the whole world."

Myers, in a briefing with reporters last week, insisted that U.S. troops are prepared to fight through all types of weather, including the frigid Afghan winter. "We have an all-weather force," he said.

With advances in reconnaissance and surveillance equipment that can see through clouds and darkness, as well as bombs and missiles guided by satellite-based global positioning systems, the weather should have little impact on airstrikes, analysts said.

U.S. troops also do "a lot of cold-weather training," said Eliot A. Cohen, of Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies.

"There are many units that are trained to fight in the harsh winter," he said, citing a Marine contingent in northern Norway and the Army's 10th Mountain Division, which has troops based in Uzbekistan.

However, winter could hamper the large-scale movements of opposition forces, said Michael Vickers, an analyst with the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment.

"The more serious strategic issue is how it slows down the Afghan opposition," said Vickers, a former member of the Navy SEALs, a special operations force. "Supporting them becomes a major logistical endeavor."

In other developments Sunday, the Taliban decided to hand out more rocket launchers, heavy machine guns and antiaircraft guns in towns, villages and districts across the country to counter U.S. ground raids, Taliban Education

Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi told Reuters. Myers denied claims by the Taliban that its forces had shot down a U.S. helicopter near the Afghan city of Kandahar and killed 25 American soldiers.

"I think that is the Taliban wishing for some good news," Myers said. "That is not correct."

Myers also acknowledged the difficulty of locating Saudi militant Bin Laden, despite a report that top U.S. intelligence officials had pinned down his location to a 20-by-20-mile area in Afghanistan. However, the Newsweek report acknowledged that the area was so full of caves and tunnels that U.S. officials said it was "impossible to seal."

"We have not been able to pinpoint exactly where all these command-and-control facilities are. We continue to look," Myers said.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon identified the two U.S. soldiers who died when their Black Hawk helicopter crashed in neighboring Pakistan after providing search and rescue support to the forces involved in a raid on Kandahar early Saturday.

The two soldiers were Spc. Jonn J. Edmunds, 20, of Cheyenne, Wyo., and Pfc. Kristofer T. Stonesifer, 28, of Missoula, Mont., both of whom were passengers in the helicopter. The men were assigned to B Company, 3rd Battalion of the 75th Ranger Regiment stationed at Fort Benning, Ga. They were the first U.S. fatalities directly tied to combat since the military operation began Oct. 7. Three soldiers were injured in the crash.

Defense officials said they were still investigating the cause of the helicopter crash, although they believe the heavy dust cloud created by the chopper's rotating blades during landing probably contributed to the incident. Despite claims by the Taliban that it had shot down the helicopter, the Pentagon ruled out hostile fire as a cause of the crash.

Lt. Col. Jim Clegg, head of the University of Montana's military science program, said that Stonesifer entered the ROTC in the fall of 1999. "He was one of my top two cadets," Clegg said in a telephone interview. "But . . . I don't think we were intense enough for him. I don't think we were moving fast enough to keep him busy."

Clegg said that he and others tried to talk Stonesifer out of enlisting in the Army last year, urging him to complete the ROTC program and join the military as an officer. "But becoming a commissioned officer wasn't necessarily what he wanted to do," Clegg said. "He wanted to be the best sort of soldier he could be. He was looking for a disciplined sort of lifestyle."

Another ROTC colleague, J.C. Schneider, said Stonesifer "was just a ball of energy, always an inspiration to be around. . . . He joined the

Rangers because that's what he wanted to do. He wanted to rappel out of helicopters and sneak around the corners of buildings. Moving in a small group to attack a bunker or set up an ambush, Stonesifer loved that stuff."

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Times staff writer Paul Watson in Ashkarga, Afghanistan, and Kim Murphy in Seattle contributed to this report.